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ISAAC LICHENSTEIN

BY JAN-TOPASS





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ISAAC LICHTENSTEIN

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ISAAC LICHENSTEIN

BY JAN-TOPASS

EDITIONS ARS, PARIS



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No one can be "virgin soil", elementary or constituted homogeniously—who is not aware of this? Besides what countless dead have given us, from an hereditary and atavistic standpoint, we are also a reflection, all our lives, of the climes to which chance has led us, or where we have elected to roam or to live. The influence and impressions of many changing environments, and the flavor of places successively visited, attach themselves and remain with us forever. Our natural gifts and tendencies are likewise added to the things transmitted to us by heredity, to the things observed and enjoyed, above all, to the things that evoke our enthusiasm and those that are imposed upon us by training. No one is without such adjunctions, such blendings, such contingencies, no one (a few rare persons excepted) is entirely free from those influences which, after all, are only inspired by admiration. Artists, with their hyper-sensitive natures, are even less free than most people. That is why they are often able to form their own characters, to mould their own personalities, upon what they like. (Upon the condition, however, that those external forces



are in harmony with their innate qualities.) Thus, far from being an imitation, this is a happy and fertile meeting. "In art", said Gauguin, "one is either a revolutionary or a plagiarist". This is a paradox, or better, the outburst of an exasperated man, which can be answered by Linnés well-known maxim : *natura non facit saltus*. Everything, to be sure, depends upon the dose. To the creator, originality is an obligation. Agreed. But of exactly what is it composed; whence does it spring; what are its origins and limits? This idea, which at first sight appeared so simple and so insistent, becomes clouded by a style, a school, or a racial influence.

Isaac Lichtenstein's art is complex. It springs from various sources and takes on divers aspects. Likewise, it depicts moods at once changing and heterogenous.

Sometimes Lichtenstein seems attracted by the pathetic aspect of things; sometimes by their humourous and grotesque side.

Now he devotes himself to Nature as she presents herself in her relative forms, appearances, external aspects (for that is all we know about Nature, after all) and again, he is seduced by artificiality, captivated by the fantastic, which arise from aesthetic theories, researches, speculations and theorems, in short, from preconceived notions.

Amongst his numerous and varied works are



landscapes where, quite unaffectedly, trees with vague silhouettes are grouped in calm, quiet country... a pond, half-stagnant, lies motionless nearby... an impassible road unfolds... soulless cottages squat heavily : all is static, silent. And there are other works where the composing elements appear to be moving and restless, to suggest something distant, veiled and secret.

We have pictures that owe nothing to chance or accident, inspired as they are by human effort alone: the docks along the Thames, portions of London in process of reconstruction. Here is a display of skill in handling geometrical forms: rows of terraces, crossed beams, ladders scaling the air—shapes, which, although utilitarian, possess lively, true rhythm and a





special beauty of their own; shapes, orderly, exact, clean-cut.

Again, we have purely abstract arrangements in the Cubist manner, involving linear problems, with straight, oblique, parallel and vertical lines, creating their own rules of perspective.

Thus, Lichtenstein's work is composite—but interesting in all of its manifestations.

According to this or that formula, and the tones changing from the minor to the major key, he convinces us with his rudely constructed masses of antique ruins, dull, dilapidated and stripped to the bone.

No one could better appreciate the drama of city corners where factory chimneys rear their endless necks, grey or faintly rose-colored, under a heavy, smoky sky.

He endows steam-cranes with agonizing power—so ill-tempered in their mechanical ac-

tion—as they work with jerky movements and shift their black or grey burdens, picking them up or vomiting them forth the moment they are at a standstill.

He paints the deaf, dumb and blind faces of windowless, deserted hangars, giving them an expression of tattered misery; the blunted angles of walls, despairingly naked, and jagged-toothed stockades.

He brings out the dizzy flight of suspension bridges, of delicate fool-hardy foot-bridges, of tottering steps, dangerously long ladders, pointed scaffoldings.

He even puts the imprint of his stormy character on everyday objects, objects that are quietly familiar to us all. I remember a tree in a landscape representing a by-street in a country town—a tree whose dry trunk stood up mournfully with its two main branches, leafless and shaggy, spread out tragically like a Calvary.

But other times, the picture smiles: a little town beneath a sun that gilds the low, small houses with their welcoming faces, and the friendly foliage happily arranged.

Sometimes the landscape grins grotesquely: Polish “isbas” all awry and crouching, with thatches like old visored caps overhanging their bleary eyes.

In most cases, however, the picture obtains its effect by a worried and worrying expression. Lichtenstein is especially fond of the joyless streets, endless stairways leading to sly,

blind alleys, narrow passages in vagrant shadow, suspect cabarets, buried in cellars, where the oblique walls form pointed arches overhead, with crystal-like facets, and sink away into shadowy niches below.

Under the human mask, he also searches for the motive force, and he paints unhappy idylls of people, grouped around a "litron", the wrinkled countenances of old people—occasionally (in the nude), the lithe, shining bodies of young people.



That our artist is Polish by birth, of Semitic origin and a great traveller, has been to a purpose. His native land has given him that nostalgic feeling, that Slavonic soulfulness, called "tensknota". From his race he has inherited a sense of the grotesque and that biting and bitter smile. And in his travels he has acquired a taste for the piquant, the unusual, the striking, such as is found in all art centres today.



Regardless of the feeling that may dominate him at the moment, Isaac Lichtenstein remains everywhere and always faithful to his first idea, his art ideal, which places construction above everything else.

And with good reason. Lichtenstein has been schooled by the discipline of Cubism. In consequence, he prefers the angle to the curve, he has a fondness for volume, for severity of outline, for the emphasis of drawing. He tries to find what is essential in the architecture of things. He does not look for nuances, nor is he interested in subtleties. He states boldly, and this holds good as well for the form as for the color.

Assuredly, Lichtensteins palette is affirmative, and even somewhat brutal. Half-tones, the gentle passing from one color to another, the delicate nuances of a sunset, transparency,

opalescence, the interplay of evanescent light, find no place in Lichtenstein's palette. His color scheme consists of several splotches of color: ochre, dull blue, bottle green (occasionally a bright green or a vivid blue), brick red and dull vermillion—handled with vigor. Sometimes a milky or chalky white strikes a deep note in the ensemble.

But generally speaking, Lichtenstein's canvases produce a sombre effect, although here and there, as in the Paris scenes and in the foggy London landscapes, there, are pale hues and golden tints. There are also some paintings in an altogether different vein (flowers, still-lifes and forest scenes) executed in a manner contrary to that which the artist has so obviously chosen as his model. They are bright, luminous and sparkling, and in this symphony a brass note rings out, but by no



means disturbing the general harmony. However, the majority of his tones seem almost smothered and are intentionally as sober in effect as the outlines and volumes are synthetic in conception.

The scope of Lichtenstein's work is indeed vast, for, with an admirable courage, he has undertaken the interpretation of many different subjects. He is a painter of country and of town, as well as a figure painter.

But to judge by the proportion of his canvases devoted to such subjects, he has a preference for the country and the city in a deserted state, that is to say, devoid of man. Nothing but the inorganic : buildings, stones, vegetation, the ground spread out at their feet and the celestial vault covering them.





The country ! The city ! Are these not sufficiently alive, sufficiently eloquent without the presence of man, without the human gesture ? Lichtenstein has joined hand with them in bonds of friendship and this, in many lands.

He has journeyed on foot through many countries, from north to south—a solitary wanderer ! He has heard the call of many lands, of different shores—of his native Poland, the Palestine of his fathers, of friendly and hospitable France which has always known how to adopt and to adapt ardent souls, yes, he has been drawn even to distant and cold England. Jerusalem with her holy atmosphere, Chartres with her Gothic splendors and friendly countryside, Paris with her thousand faces, noisy, smoky London, forbidding but uniquely pictur-

esque Spain, all have seen him with his painter's equipment—not to mention a host of small towns and villages in Poland.

All of these places have left their imprint on him; from all of them he has carried away a host of precious memories, memories of the places visited, of the people he has met and whose lives he has shared, and memories of his dreams—all have left their seal on his mind and on his soul.

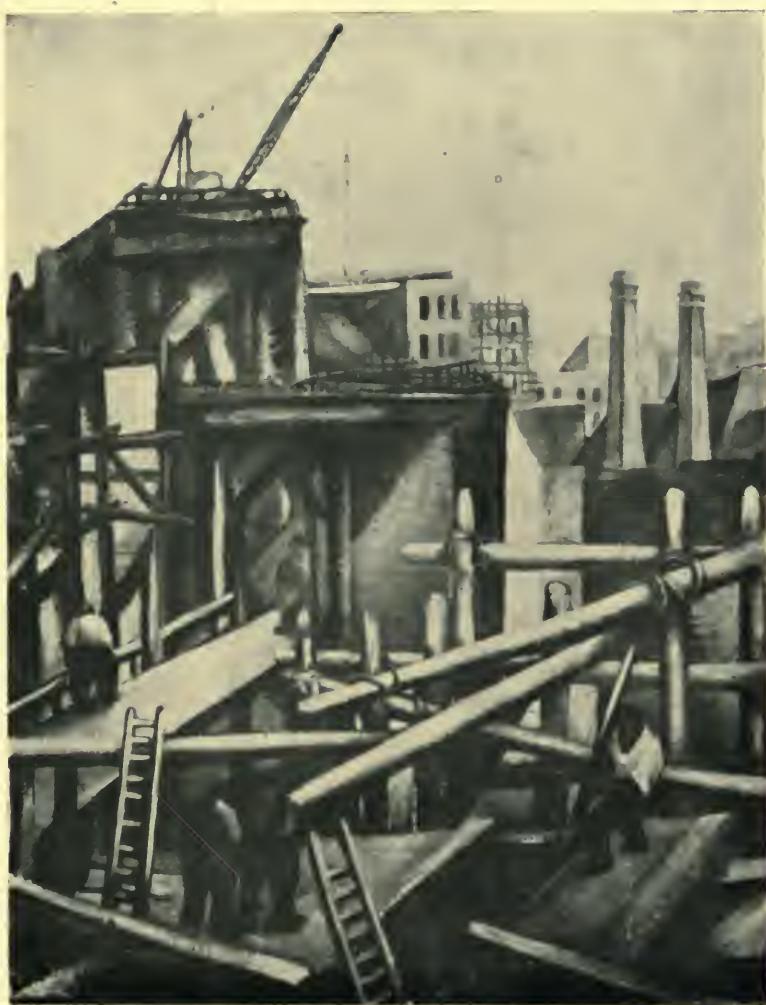
In spite of this multitude of influences, of currents and atmosphere in harmony with his being, if we are to classify Isaac Lichtenstein, we must place him in the very middle of the Paris School of Painting, which, in a great measure, is composed of foreign and even exotic, contributions. But it is there that he would find himself the most at home, with his talent, his ambitions and his accomplishments. It is there that his aesthetic ideal belongs, an ideal that recognizes beauty only where character is well accentuated, —resulting in a rude and honest method with thick layers of paint applied sometimes with the brush and sometimes with the palette knife. His drawing is a sort of simplified writing *, underscoring only the essential traits, the important points, and his method of thick painting is sound and sober.

JAN-TOPASS.

* This simplified system of drawing, reduced to its most primitive form, may best be appreciated in the artist's dry-points,—where the outlines are scratched on the plate with thin, precise strokes.

REPRODUCTIONS

I Construction.
II Old Street.
III Ratskeler.
IV Blind Fidler.
V Polish landscape.
VI Factory.
VII A couple.
VIII Old houses.
IX After rain.
X Paris Street.
XI A Family (aquarelle).
XII Factory (indigo).







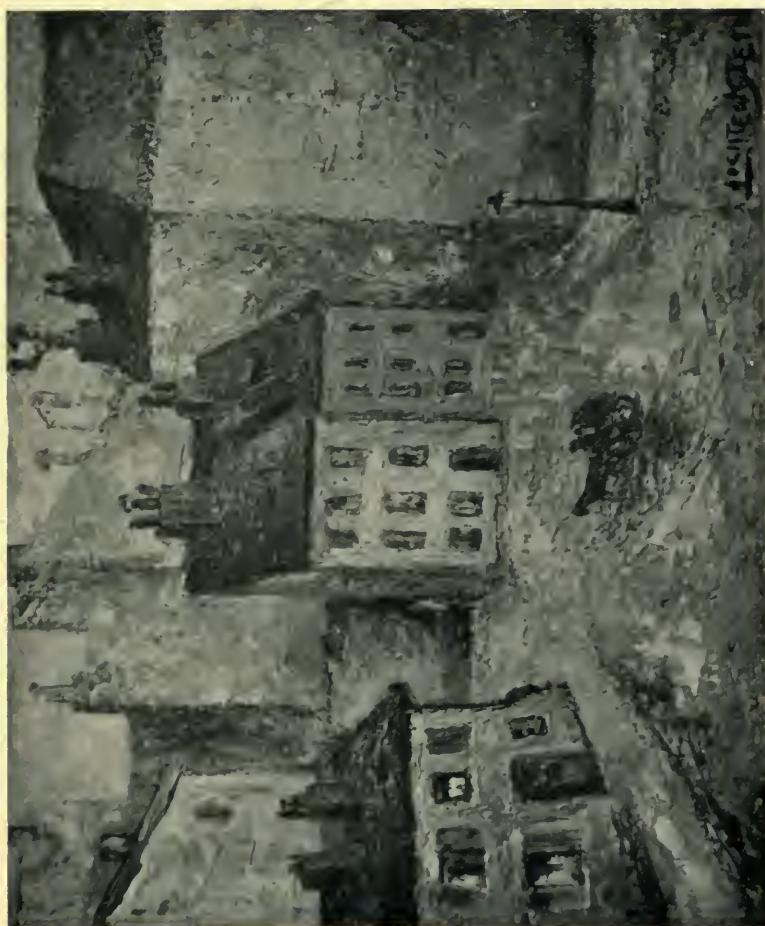




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